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ABSTRACT

Declining enrollments in college-level geography courses have caused educators to assess current curriculum and research emphases within geography departments and to appraise those courses of action they might take to enhance geography's attractiveness to students. Current problems affecting geography can be placed in two categories--(1) general environmental problems affecting colleges and universities, including decreased funding, decline in the total number of students enrolled and/or seeking enrollment, and rising institutional costs, and (2) problems peculiar to the discipline of geography, including changes in student preferences toward career-oriented curriculum, emphasis in many courses and departments on esoteric rather than practical geographic information, and failure to develop useful professional skills. Based on a review of these problems, it is suggested that although geography departments can do very little to solve the general problems in the first category, they can respond to problems in the second category. For example, departments can develop programs and courses which respond to student needs, can increase cooperation with other academic departments and with the business world, can increase efforts to help students find geography-related employment upon graduation, and can help students develop professional geography skills which might make them more employable. (DB)

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CAN/WILL GEOGRAPHY DEPARTMENTS SURVIVE THE NEXT DECADE

Elaine Wallace*

ABSTRACT

Geography in higher education has in the past been viewed by many as a minor discipline. If we are to prevent the closing of many geography departments in the coming decades, institutions of higher education must design geography programs which will offer students assurance that their education will be beneficial to them. Students are demanding learning of a more practical nature. It is the responsibility of national associations and individual disciplines to ensure all involved that institutions of higher education are producing graduates who have employable skills.

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A great deal of education is happening without carefully designed programs. Many educators believe that institutional survival and viability will be found through group affiliation. It is no longer possible for institutions of higher education to be accorded the luxuries of privileged sanctuaries set aside from the larger environment. "Inflation, decreasing college enrollment, and cutbacks in federal funding to higher education suggest hard times ahead for the higher education community?" (Cooke, 1979, p. 79).

Major environmental conditions under which colleges and universities will have to function over the next 10 to 20 years are:

1. A national decline of fifteen to twenty per cent in the number of eighteen years-olds between 1980 and 1990. This decline will vary greatly by regions of the country and will impact differentially on institutions depending on the strength of their competitive position and other factors.

2. Changes in student preference, which historically have proven to be unpredictable, seem to be directed toward more 'career-oriented' curriculum.

3. Institutional costs are likely to continue to rise faster than revenues. (Mortimer and Tierney, 1979 p. 1)

Declining Enrollment:

The Carnegie Council predicts a 5 to 15 per cent decline in total undergraduate enrollments in the next two decades (Scully, January 1980, p. 1). The Council outlines future enrollments as follows: (1) To begin, by 1997 the enrollment of the 18-24 year age group will decline by 23.3 per cent. (2) However, 20 per cent of the undergraduate enrollments (FTE) will be students over 24 years, thus reducing the prospective decline to 19 per cent. (3) There will be an increase in enrollment of persons over 25 years of age which will reduce the

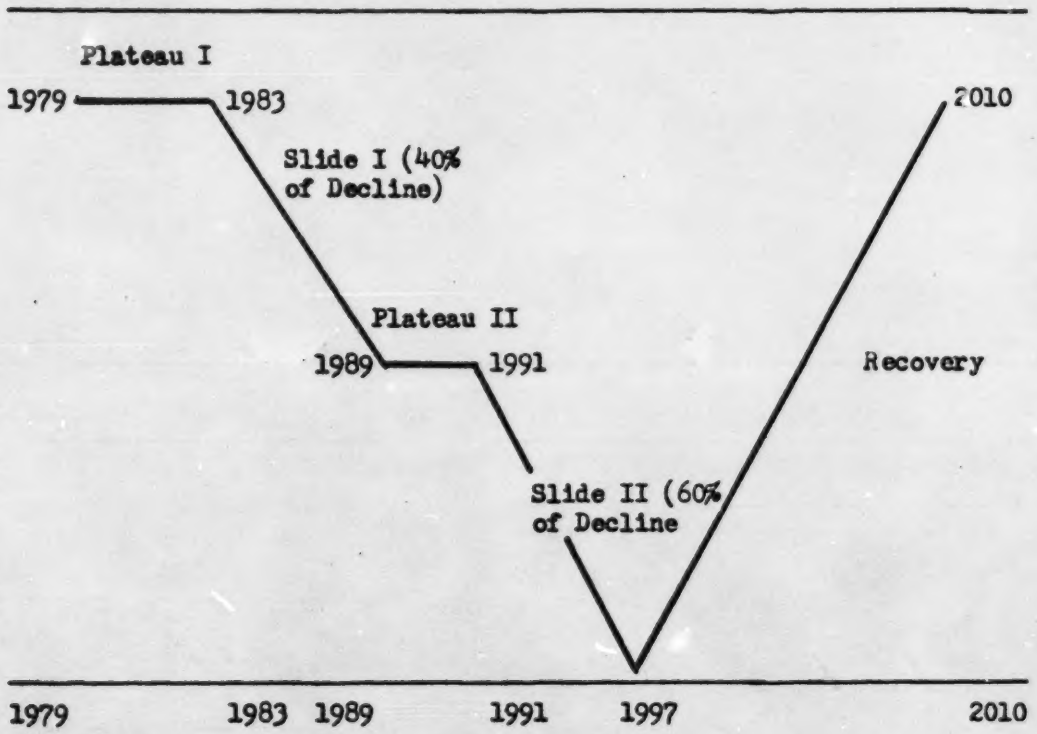
prospective decline to 10 per cent. (4) The decline in males 18-24 year olds will not exceed an impact of more than 5 per cent on total enrollment (Figure I shows a generalized view of enrollments, 1979 - 2010).

Specialized Demands:

Today students are required to pay back an increasing proportion of the total cost of their education. This payback system has encouraged students to choose the institution or program that appears to offer them the most education for the least amount of money. Students are demanding assurance that their education will help them earn a living. Higher education graduates are dissatisfied and feel ill-equipped for the "real world". Students are not being trained for existing jobs and are unable to find positions within their specialty fields. Ph.D.'s in the physical and natural sciences have had difficulty in landing jobs for which they are suited and in numerous instances have had to accept jobs well below levels for which they have been educated. In some instances they have had to undergo extensive additional training in interdisciplinary studies. In extreme cases post graduates have dropped out of the professions because of the unavailability of jobs within the specific area of their training. This is particularly troublesome considering the considerable sums of money which both the student and society spend in developing a graduates scientific capability. They want learning of a more practical nature (Cartter, 1976). It is the responsibility of the institution to ensure all involved that educational institutions are currently producing graduates who have employable capabilities. Career or market orientation education is a result of the increase enrollment of the "nontraditional" student (older students, part-time students, women and minorities).

FIGURE I

GENERALIZED VIEW OF ENROLLMENTS, 1979-2010



Source: Carnegie Final Report, 1980, p. 27.

Colleges and universities are and will continue to experience change in the curricula and patterns of majors.

Institutional Revenues and Rising Costs:

The past twenty years have been considered a "federal period" in terms of new initiative in higher education. The next twenty years will be a "state period" in terms of new initiatives and responsibilities for the welfare of higher education (Carnegie, 1980, p. 119). The rate of growth in federal government appropriations to higher education has been reduced to approximately the rate of inflation. Revenues from tuition and fees will decline in the future because of the predicted drop in enrollment. Gifts from both private individuals and business corporations will decrease because of the recession which the country is in (Mortimer and Tierney, 1979, p. 1).

A revision in the guidelines for the recovery of indirect costs has substantially increased institutional costs. The rise in the cost of laboratory materials, supplies and equipment, and academic and non-academic salaries account for part of the increase in institutional expenditures. Some national educational cost indexes show that the costs in education have risen at a rate substantially higher than consumer prices indexes (Agor, August, 1975, p. 10).

Geography Departments in Higher Education Today:

The ability of individual discipline to meet these and future environmental conditions under which colleges and universities will have to function over the next decade can be greatly enhanced by

cooperation between the academic and business worlds. The countries Geography Departments have responded slowly to the changing needs of society. Many geography departments continue to produce graduates trained for a very small and select employment market. Geography students are demanding courses in which the topics are made specific to particular occupational needs or problems of interest. To meet these demands Geography Departments must develop courses and programs which respond to the students needs.

Undergraduate students feel that faculty members have been ignoring them while concentrating on research and graduate students. Departments must remember that in many instances it is the individual discipline's undergraduate students who will eventually be their graduate students. If Geography Departments do not meet the demands of the undergraduate they will lose their students to other disciplines.

The Admissions Testing Program of the College Board reported that in 1979 less than 0.1 percent college-bound seniors intended to study geography (Table I) (Science Education Datebook, 1980). The National Research Council files show a decrease in earned doctorates in geography since 1973 (Table II) (National Research Council). A profile (members by occupation) of the Association of American Geographers from 1978 to 1980 show a decrease in student membership. In 1978, 1471 students were members and in 1980 it dropped to 1338 a loss of 133 students (AAG Newsletter, March, 1981).

Unless the countries geography departments respond immediately to the demands which society is making they will be forced to close doors within the next decade. Recently it was announced that the Geography

TABLE I

Percent of college-bound seniors intending to study various fields 1979*

	%
Arts and Humanities	12.7
Architecture/Environmental Design	1.8
Art	4.4
English/Literature	1.6
Foreign Language	1.0
Music	2.0
Philosophy and Religion	0.4
Theater Arts	1.5
Biological Sciences and Related Areas	22.1
Agriculture	1.7
Biological Sciences	3.7
Forestry/Conservation	1.1
Health and Medical	15.5
Business, Commerce, and Communications	21.2
Business and Commerce	17.8
Communications	3.5
Physical Sciences and Related Areas	16.9
Computer Science/Systems Analysis	3.3
Engineering	10.1
Mathematics	1.2
Physical Sciences	2.2
Social Sciences and Related Areas	20.3
Education	6.5
Ethnic Studies	0.0
Geography	0.0
History and Cultures	0.7
Home Economics	0.7
Library Science	0.1
Military Science	0.7
Psychology	3.4
Social Sciences	8.2
Miscellaneous	6.8
Other	1.1
Trade and Vocational	1.1
Undecided	4.6

*Source: Admissions Testing Program of the College Board, National Report, College Bound Seniors, 1979, p. 18.

TABLE II

Earned Doctorates in Geography in the U. S. A.*

YEAR	TOTAL
1970	137
1971	158
1972	177
1973	215
1974	195
1975	187
1976	155
1977	155
1978	158
1979	129

*Source: National Research Council, Washington, D. C., Commission on Human Resources, Doctorate Records File

Department at the University of Michigan is being considered for closing. Reasons given are lack of funds, low student enrollment, and the unemployment of graduates.

Faculty members must respond to the student. Courses and programs must be revised to meet the student's demands. Geography Departments are being asked to justify the purpose of their existing curriculum. They have to be able to give a positive answer to the following questions: Does the existing curriculum help a graduate earn a living? Are they training students for the "real world"? Geography has to change with the time or die as a discipline in many of our institutions of higher education.

Summary:

Geography enrollments are on the decline. Students are demanding an education that will help them earn a living. They want to be equipped for the "real world". Career oriented course and programs must be developed and more attention has to be given to the undergraduate student.

Faculty members must show justification for each existing course. They need to determine if their existing course is doing more than just presenting the students with informative information which will not directly effect their future employment. In the past only a few Geography Departments have been training for existing jobs. In future Geography Departments will have to cooperate with other academic departments and with the business world in order to continue their existence.

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